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# Toward a framework for reading lived experiences as texts: A four-year self-study of teacher education practices

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## Context

The crux of professional learning for educators is to empower others to construct meaningful understanding through educative experiences (Dewey, 1938). In order for teachers to use their knowledge to improve their teaching practice and to create educative experiences for others, they must first construct an understanding as learners themselves. This process of making meaning, as opposed to getting meaning, is dependent on teachers' opportunity to transact with texts, and is aided by communication with and support from a caring community of learners. We are three female teacher educators and program leaders representing special education, educational leadership and literacy education for a teaching-focused university in the Midwestern United States.

We view ourselves as active meaning makers who can learn from our teacher education practices as "texts" which we can analyze and discuss with "critical friends" (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 819) through self-study methodology. We defined *text* in a broader sense to include the idea that lived experiences once textualized (Edge, 2011) could then be shared, interpreted, reinterpreted, and analyzed. Textualizing our lived experiences and studying them through collaborative self-study methodology, we have learned how to construct meaningful understating about our teaching practices. We have learned how to empower others—prospective teachers, practicing teachers, administrators, and colleagues to intentionally study their own lived experiences like texts.

To guide our professional inquiry, we situated our self-study in transactional reading and learning theory (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994; Rosenblatt, 2005) and feminist communication theory (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997; Colflesh, 1996). Epistemologically, transactional and feminist communication theories recognize the relationship between a knower and his or her environment, both in what they know and how they communicate that knowledge. Humans share an ecological relationship with their environment—both taking from it and contributing to it (Dewey & Bentley,

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1949; Rosenblatt, 2005), much like Gee's (2008) notion of society as an ambiguous cultural text that is read and composed by its members. The knower, the known and knowing are aspects of one process (Dewey & Bentley, 1949).

## Aims

As products of the American school system, we are enculturated to value print-based texts as the authoritative medium for learning. As a result, we have become skilled at the ability to learn from and teach through print-based texts. However, as teacher educators, we also value the authority of lived experiences. How does one systematically or at least intentionally learn from their own and others' lived experiences? Through self-study methodology, we began to see and to explore the tensions between these two often competing values. What initially began as a one-year self-study evolved and grew into a four-year longitudinal study of our lived experiences as texts. Looking back over the four years of using self-study methodology, we recognized that what enabled us (and our study) to grow was textualizing lived personal and professional experiences as both objects and mediums for learning.

Examining how we have enacted four years of self-study, our purpose is to begin to articulate a framework for learning from lived experiences through textualizing (Edge, 2011) critical events (Webster & Mertova, 2007) in a self-study space. We use the term *textualize* as in "to textualize an experience" to refer to an intentional stance in which a researcher "takes a step back from lived experience and examines it in a way similar to how a reader might objectify a text's construction, her own reading experience, or her process of understanding a text" (Edge, 2011, p. 330).

## Theoretical framework

### *Feminist perspectives*

Teaching is "intimate work" (Bruner, 1996, p. 86). Professional learning that makes a difference in classroom instruction offers educators opportunities grounded in the complex environment of practice while supporting and nurturing reflections and discourse on their developing knowledge, often termed praxis. From a feminist perspective, care and understanding are at the center of teaching and learning (Noddings, 1984). Like the typically female role of a midwife who helps draw new life from the mother, a teacher recognizes that knowledge is created within and drawn from the learner. Such a theory of knowledge creation is a departure from the more traditional and often male perspective of a banker who deposits knowledge within the learner (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

Expanding the feminist focus on care and understanding, a framework for women's ways of knowing grounded our research. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) advocate for women to become constructivist knowers who see knowledge as actively constructed by all human beings. Constructivist knowers move beyond silent receivers of knowledge and act with a sense of agency. To act with agency, women must gain confidence and skill in using information from a wide range of sources to form their own understandings (Colflesh, 1996).

Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock (1997) describe spaces within which women learn together and move toward constructivist knowing as "public homeplaces" or places where "people support each other's development and where everyone is expected to participate in developing the homeplace" (p. 13). In public homeplaces, participants feel safe enough to express their thoughts and envision possibilities beyond their current situations. Much as in Close and Langer's (1995) ideas on "envisionment building" (p. 3) when reading literature, as members of a "public homeplace" textualize and share their lived experiences, they begin to "explore the horizons of possibilities" (p. 3). When reading for information, Close and Langer (1995) suggest that the reader "maintains a point of reference" (p. 3) while:

...their envisionments are shaped by their questions and explorations that bring them closer to the information they seek and that help them better understand the topic. As people read,

they use the content to narrow the possibilities of meaning and sharpen their understandings of information. Using information gained along the way (combined with what they already know) to refine their understanding, they seek to get the author's point or understand more and more about the topic. (p. 3)

As the researchers in this study, we read our experiences as texts so that we could explore possibilities and let our questions and explorations help us better understand and sharpen our interpretations of those experiences.

As researchers, we used extended dialogue to wrestle with ideas. We listened to each other's ideas carefully and spoke our own emerging ideas, knowing that dialogue allows ideas to clarify, change, and expand. Participants in a public homeplace develop self-respect, confidence, and a sense of agency through this process. Textualizing experiences helped each researcher develop skills of constructivist knowers as we read our experiences, created new interpretations, and incorporated new insights constructed with critical friends (Edge, 2011). One can learn to become a constructivist thinker in a public homeplace where such thinking is valued and modeled; a public homeplace offers a learning environment in which all members become one among equals and where power is shared among all. Educators who are constructivist thinkers are more likely to see their students as capable of thinking and constructing new ideas (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997) and to enable their students to see learning as a dynamic, symbiotic, and transactional relationship.

#### *Transactional perspectives*

In transactional theory, learners are in a state of transaction with their environments including their own knowledge and experiences, sources of knowledge beyond the self, and with other learners. According to Rosenblatt (1978/1994), as readers interpret texts, they are changed by the texts as well as changing the meaning of texts through their interpretations. So learning occurs both from within the learner and from shared interpretations that expand the reader's questions and insights. We saw parallels between these two bodies of research and used both perspectives to frame this study.

Teacher learning that improves teaching practice requires not only new knowledge and skills, but also new ways of thinking and of seeing oneself. As teachers become confident knowledge constructors, they learn through praxis or trying new practices while seeking to understand why those practices work or do not work. Thus, teachers become researchers who learn new ways to think about and to carry out their work; they become more deliberate and attentive to their instructional decisions (Cohen, 2011). Teachers with a well-developed sense of agency build theory grounded in classroom practice (Bruner, 1996). Through inquiry, they actively formulate questions of importance to them, direct their own investigations, and communicate their newly constructed ideas, thus improving their practice in the process (Liston & Zeichner, 1991).

Transactional theory also suggests that learning occurs when people consider, discuss, and inquire into problems and issues of significance to them (Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994; Rosenblatt, 2005). Based on this framework, the goal of professional learning for educators would be that they become constructivist thinkers and knowers through reading their own experiences, sharing their interpretations, and expanding those interpretations within a trusted community with the intent of improving their teaching practice.

Merging the two broad areas of research, feminist and transactional theories, provided the theoretical framework of our study. This framework created space for each of the authors to grow and to learn personally and professionally both individually and collectively.

## **Methods**

Across all four years of this longitudinal study, we chose to situate our inquiry in self-study methodology. Rooted in post-modernist and feminist thinking (LaBoskey, 2004), self-study methodology both informs the researchers and generates knowledge that can be shared within and beyond the professional discourse community. Self-study research does not prove answers, but instead helps the researchers to explore and challenge their assumptions with the purpose of improving their understanding and practice of teaching (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

Each year, the researchers independently identified a critical event from her lived experiences, formulated a self-study sub-question, and textualized the experience. Through writing, each situated the critical event within its broader context, engaged in meaning analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), and wrote to construct understanding (Richardson, 2000) of what she thought was happening in the critical events that she studied. Next, we each orally shared the critical event within a “public homeplace” (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997, p.13) using a modified collaborative conference protocol (Anderson, et al., 2010; Cameron-Standerford, et al., 2013; Sidel, et al., 1997). The protocol guided us to see and re-see our critical event from multiple perspectives and form a new understanding of practice (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). This protocol included: listening to each individual’s initial analysis of the teaching event and subsequent learning; taking turns saying what we heard or noticed while the individual who had shared quietly took notes; taking turns offering speculative comments, connections, and wonderings; inviting the individual back into the conversation to respond to comments or questions offered by the group or to offer additional details or insights sparked by listening to the group; and writing take-away reflections. Individual take-away statements became a way to attend to the themes developing from our collective work. The data collected included reflective journals; documented decisions during class sessions; conversations with critical friends; anonymous student feedback from course ratings; written and visual artifacts from our teaching and learning experiences; and peer reviewed artifacts. Examining critical events and related artifacts through multiple data sources and perspectives, we “crystallized” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963) our data by considering each emerging theme.

## Outcomes

### *Year 1: Stepping into the self-study space*

In 2011, we were new faculty members who were invited to join an existing self-study group at our university. We joined as strangers to the group and to one another. We were transitioning from our work as K-12 educators into the academy as new assistant professors. This self-study group challenged us to textualize a professional critical event communicated as a personal lived experience. Part of the challenge of entering a self-study space is that we viewed the self-study members as professionals, not yet critical friends. They were critical others but not yet critical friends.

We began our first year of self-study with the guiding question of: “What can we learn about our teaching by critically discussing the texts of our teacher education practices?” We learned that our teaching experiences could become engaging texts open to multiple interpretations leading to new knowledge. Our culminating take away was a renewed commitment to model for teacher education students how to textualize, share, and grow from their own and each other’s experiences (Cameron-Standerford, et al., 2013).

### *Year 2: Being in and moving through the self-study space*

We embraced the personal and professional tensions identified in year one and as a result brought our professional events to the forefront. We narrowed our focus by asking, “How does our use of visual texts in our teaching practice help to convey and communicate meaning?” The findings from year two revealed that when learners were a part of rather than outside the interpretative act, visual texts became a medium through which both students and teachers could deepen and broaden their understanding of themselves, effective pedagogy, and their professional milieu.

### *Year 3: Using what we learned to (re)create an online homeplace for students*

In year three, we took a step to examine what we know by shifting the inquiry focus to study: “How can we help graduate students in fully online classrooms step inside their learning experiences and become a part of the interpretive act?” Findings from the third year of the study demonstrate how intentionally cultivating an online homeplace—similar to the homeplace referenced in year one—generated space for graduate students to see and critically examine their own lived experiences as teachers and leaders in special education, literacy and administration.

### *Year 4: Taking a step back to examine our self-study experiences*

As we began year four of our study, our goal was to begin to articulate a framework to advance professional inquiry by purposefully learning from lived experiences. We took a step back to broaden our focus by textualizing the entire three-year self-study experience in order to examine: How does one systematically or at least intentionally learn from their own and others' lived experiences? Preliminary analysis has identified the following elements of our framework:

- Personal and professional wobble lead to shared trust
- Recognizing the need for time, space, and a process
- Textualized experiences become both an object and medium through which we make meaning
- A dynamic, ecological theoretical framework created space to read and to compose experiences as texts
- Relationships between critical friends are grounded in both personal and professional events

The process of textualizing lived experiences that we initially used to guide our first year's study has held true in multiple contexts for ourselves and our students as learners. Our relationship as critical friends allowed us to experience shared events that evolved into collective critical events. As our context, critical friends, and the concept of *text* broadened, *the process* of making meaning from textualized experiences has remained constant.

## Contributions

Existing scholarship growing from the broader body of teacher education literature and from literature focused on self-study of teacher education practices (SSTEP) has characterized construct of experience as both problematic and promising for growth in the knowledge and practice of teaching (e.g. Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Bullough, 1997; Dewey, 1938; Edge, 2015; Hamilton, 2004; Loughran & Russell, 1997; Munby & Russell, 1994; Nolan, 1982). Tensions between these depictions of experience in education acknowledge that while the "authority of experience" (Munby & Russell, 1994) honors the knowledge individuals develop from personal experiences, the challenge for *teacher educators* is to both value their students' experiences while also challenging them to see and "to interpret their own meaning in ways that they have not had to before and to translate insights into future teaching" (Loughran & Russell, 1997, p. 164). As Berry (2004) noted, few studies clearly illustrate this tension in action. Furthermore, as we (Edge, Bergh, & Cameron-Standerford, 2016) have argued elsewhere, there is a need to also articulate the process by which we have made meaning from experiences.

It is in harnessing our experiences—textualizing them—that we can see them as an object, a text we can read and learn from. Textualizing experiences goes beyond reflection; it objectifies a lived experience in a way that permits both an individual and others to first see the experience outside of themselves and then to re-enter the reading of that experience as a new event through which one makes meaning. (p.7)

This preliminary analysis of four years of self-study is a first step toward articulating a process through which meaning can be made from textualizing and critically reading lived experiences.

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